DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 689 EC 132 427

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TITLE Equitable Competency Testing: Emerging Policy Issues and Options for Handicapped Students.
INSTITUTION Council for Exceptional Children, Reston, Va.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Special Education (ED), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Dec 80
GRANT G007702411
NOTE 21p.: A part of the Policy Options Project.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; *Educational Policy; Educational Trends; *Graduation Requirements; *Minimum Competency Testing; Policy Formation; Public Policy; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

The issues surrounding minimum competency testing (MCT) and the handicapped are analyzed in light of federal mandates in P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, for a free appropriate public education. Five policy approaches regarding graduation requirements are considered for positive and negative implications: the pass/fail approach; the certificate of attendance approach; the individualized education program approach; and the curricular approach (each curriculum having its own graduation requirements). The importance of flexibility in making and applying policy is emphasized. (CL)

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EQUITABLE COMPETENCY TESTING: EMERGING POLICY ISSUES AND OPTIONS FOR HANDICAPPED STUDENTS

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Policy Options Project

December 1980

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The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia

EC132427

Published in 1980 by The Council for Exceptional Children

The work performed herein was done pursuant to a grant from the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (now the Office of Special Education with the Department of Education) (Grant Number: G007702411). The opinions expressed herein, however, do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education should be inferred.

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Introduction

American education has been challenged in recent years to provide equal access to educational opportunity for all students. With the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-112), all handicapped students have been assured the right to a free appropriate public education and to receive that education, whenever appropriate, with their nonhandicapped peer group.

An assumption supporting the right to a free appropriate public education is that handicapped children will have an opportunity to complete their education, graduate, and receive a diploma signifying such an achievement. Based on an analysis of state statutes, the Policy Options Project at The Council for Exceptional Children found that this assumption has little foundation in state or local policy and/or practice. Inconsistencies exist among states and within states regarding minimum competency testing and graduation requirements for handicapped students. Moreover, there are great variations in the manner in which handicapped students complete graduation requirements and in whether or not they receive a diploma. Many of the educational gains made by handicapped students could be threatened or delayed unless state and local educational policies in this area are formulated to resolve the inconsistencies and potentially discriminatory practices, and assure that minimum competency tests in general and graduation requirements in particular are equitably applied to all students.

The Implications of Public Policy

Since the passage of P.L. 94-142, the trend to establish for the handicapped the same right to an education that already exists for the nonhandicapped is now ingrained in the basic fabric of the American education. While the most significant measure of the impact of this trend is the number of children who are now

receiving an appropriate education, it is clear that other basic public policy matters will continue to emerge during the coming decade. One such issue is the impact of minimum competency testing on handicapped students.

As a result of growing public demand for educational accountability, minimum competency testing (MCT) legislation is now a reality in three-fourths of the states (Pipho, 1979). The passage of a competency test is required for high school graduation in 17 states. Sometimes, local school districts are given the option of using the test as a graduation requirement, while in other states the test is used solely to identify a student's remediation needs (McCarthy, 1980). Consequently, throughout the country, state and local educational policy makers are wrestling with such questions as:

- What are the beneficial and harmful effects of MCT or student achievement?
- Will MCT have a positive or negative effect on public perceptions of educational quality?
- What influence will MCT have on the curriculum of public schools?
- What are the anticipated effect of MCT on the education of minority students, especially those who are handicapped?
- What impact does MCT have on student attitude?

As policy makers also deliberate issues of test validity and reliability, they should ask the question: Who will ultimately benefit most from the restructuring of standards by means of competency based testing. The student? The community? Teachers or large testing companies? Each group could potentially gain; but only the student group could suffer irreparable losses (Hockenberry, 1979). Advocacy groups, especially those concerned about minority and handicapped persons, are closely following competency testing debates, lest hard won gains over the past three decades are voided by legislation and regulations which limit a student's access to regular education programs or to the attainment of a diploma signifying successful completion of graduation requirements.

Before addressing specific policy issues related to accommodations for handicapped students to take competency tests, it would be helpful to trace the historical evolution of the concept of providing a free appropriate public education for each handicapped child. Such an approach underscores the crucial importance of minimum competency testing and graduation requirements on handicapped students. State and local public policies on MCT have the potential to determine the future destinies of handicapped persons. As Weintraub and Abeson (1974) have stated:

1. Public policy determines the degree to which minorities will be treated inequitably by the controlling majority.
2. Public policy determines the degree to which those who are served will be vulnerable to abuse from those who provide the services.
3. Public policy determines how society will perceive a class or group of individuals.
4. Public policy determines how a class or group of individuals will perceive themselves.

Practical application of these public policy premises in the area of special education can be documented in litigation and legislation during the past three decades.

The Right to Equal Protection of the Law

The requirements and practice of provision of an education commensurate with the educational needs of a handicapped child is predicated on an individual's right to equal protection of the law. The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees that no state shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

This constitutional provision has been interpreted to mean that government action cannot discriminate among persons in a given situation unless it can be demonstrated that differential treatment is justified to achieve a valid goal. While the Constitution does not specifically guarantee the right to an education, it does secure the right "to equal treatment where the state had undertaken to provide public education to the persons within its borders." (Fleming v. Adams, 377 F. 2d 975 (10th Cir. 1967)). Application of this principle to minority groups began with the now famous civil rights case of Brown v. Board of Education (1954). In ruling, the Supreme Court argued that:

> Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local government...Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity where the state has undertaken to provide it is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. (Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483, 493, 74 S. Ct. 686, 691, 98 L.Ed. 873 (1954))

Since the Brown decision, the Courts have consistently rules that where the state has undertaken to provide public education for some, the right must be made available to all on equal terms. While the Brown case focused attention on the injustices suffered by a racial minority, the legal principles and issues involved relate to other minorities, including the handicapped as they seek equal protection of the law. This United States Supreme Court decision which rules de jure school segregation unconstitutional is usually credited with starting the shift in school law toward broader constitutional and public policy concerns (Kirp and Yudof, 1974).

Equality Equals Sameness

Specifically, the shift in public policy has centered around the concept of equality. Brown (1954) stipulated that where a state has undertaken to provide education, it is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. In

educational practice, the term "equality" meant "sameness." The impact of this principle upon children in need of special education and related services was staggering. Education was regarded as a process whereby everyone had equal access to its resources and equal opportunity to meet or fail its objectives. If a special education child could not benefit from what was offered to all children, then the child was frequently not eligible to participate. If the child could not be expected to achieve what other children were expected to achieve, then (s)he was not eligible or discouraged from participating. Equal access to equal resources was to result in equal achievement.

Equal Access to Differing Resources for Equal Objectives

During the decade of the 60's, American education moved into the compensatory period. Children with unequal needs were given equal access to differing resources to achieve educational objectives. Coleman (1968) defines such a concept as "equality of results given different individual inputs" (p. 17). This would imply that equality exists when students, no matter what their entry behaviors or conditions may be, successfully achieve educational objectives. For example, equality is achieved when all children learn to read, regardless of the differentiated resources committed to achieve that purpose.

The basic flaw in this concept is that it assumes that all children have innate capabilities for common educational attainments. The Coleman definition needs modification to be relevant to the plight of handicapped children. Educational equality should be defined as equality of access to different resources to attain different individual goals.

Equal Access to Differing Resources for Differing Objectives

It is this concept of equality that has evolved from the courts in right to education suits and from legislation during the 1970's. The consent agreement in

Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PARC) ordered the Commonwealth to provide every retarded person between the ages of six and twenty-one "access to a free public program of education and training appropriate to his learning capacities." This concept of the right of handicapped children to an appropriate education was expanded by the court in Mills v. Board of Education. In Mills, the court ordered that the District of Columbia "shall provide plaintiffs...with a publicly supported education suited to their plaintiffs' needs..." (Mills v. Board of Education of D.C., 384 F. Supp. 866, 1972, Judgment #5).

The PARC case also established the principle that education could not be defined solely by the existing curriculum or methodology. Rather, education must be seen as a continuous process by which individuals learn to cope and function within their environment. Mills, in establishing the constitutional right of handicapped children to an education, also noted that this right could not be conditional on the availability or sufficiency of the systems' financial resources.

Federal Laws and Regulations

Under P.L. 94-142, handicapped students are guaranteed a free appropriate public education and other statutory and procedural safeguards. Central to this federal mandate is the provision for an individualized education program (IEP) to be developed for each handicapped student to insure that special education and related services are provided free of charge (20 U.S.C. 1412, Sections 612 and 614). Since the contents of an IEP define an "appropriate education" for a handicapped child, the efficacy of the IEP as a determinant for issues related to competency-based testing could be considered.

While competency testing has its origin in a community's right to hold a school system accountable, P.L. 94-142 relates more to individual rights and achievement. There is a need to merge societal and individual rights into a working relationship to achieve unique objectives. Operationally, the intent of both

competency testing programs and P.L. 94-142 is to increase the number of students leaving school who are capable of coping with their environment (Olsen, 1980).

Because most states and local school districts are the recipients of a variety of federal monies, the provisions of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act apply to any discussion regarding minimum competency tests. Section 504 reads in whole:

> No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States, as defined in section 7(6), shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

If minimum competency test standards are applied discriminately, then educational inequities may result. When a handicapped person is excluded from participation in a program or denied benefits, then claims of violations of Section 504, P.L. 94-142, and the Fourteenth Amendment may prove to be substantiated (Hockenberry), 1979). Regulations for Section 504 stipulate:

> Benefits and services, to be equally effective, are not required to produce the idential result or level of achievement for handicapped and nonhandicapped persons, but must afford handicapped persons equal opportunity to obtain the same result, to gain the same benefit, or to reach the same level of achievement...(45 C.F.R. 84.4(b)(2)).

Section 504 is the basic civil rights provision with respect to terminating discrimination against America's handicapped citizens (Ballard, 1978). Whether or not handicapped students can participate in an MCT program is not the question; by law they must be allowed to participate, provided that the tests and standards are developed and administered appropriately, the results are valid, and are interpreted by a team of persons familiar with the individual (Linde and Olsen, 1980).

Section 504 does not mandate that handicapped persons are to necessarily receive the exact benefits of nonhandicapped individuals. The "benefit" for a different outcome may be denied or modified. The opportunity to obtain the same result, however, must be given. For example, accommodations must be made for a

handicapped student to master the prerequisites for a high school diploma, but a diploma (benefit) can be denied if a handicapped person does not meet the qualifications (McCarthy, 1980).

Current Trends Regarding MCT and the Handicapped

Hastily established minimum competency programs, especially for students with handicapping conditions, risks legal and pedagogical conflicts. As we have seen, federal policies for students with special needs assume that each student's educational needs are unique and thus require individualized programming and separate evaluation and examination. Competency testing programs, in contrast, imply that all students should meet a uniform set of minimum standards and be evaluated through a uniform assessment instrument (Rosewater, 1979).

Recently published reports and studies concerning minimum competency testing and handicapped students (Haney and Madaus, 1978; McClung and Pullin, 1978: Candor-Chandler, 1978; NASDSE, 1979; Rosewater, 1979; Linde and Olsen, 1980), all describe the potential for discriminatory practices in testing procedures, exclusionary policies for certain "classes" of students (minorities and the handicapped) and state and local school board policies which prevent handicapped students from sharing in educational opportunities (diploma, courses and curricula) offered to nonhandicapped students.

In analyzing the reports and studies of the above mentioned authors, Hockenberry (1979) has identified six key areas for concern to handicapped students:

1. Access to regular school programs and services, which may be denied because of "tracking" programs instituted by results of minimum competency testing (MCT) programs;
2. Modifications in tests and procedures that would enable certain handicapped students to take minimum competency tests that are required for a high school diploma;

3. Exemptions and different standards and testing programs as outlined in the IEP for those severely handicapped students for whom MCT would be inappropriate;
4. Access to a regular high school diploma if the necessary state and local standards are completed;
5. MCT programs could discriminate against students enrolled in vocational education programs; and
6. Minimum competency tests must be validated for the specific purpose for which they are used and must reflect a student's achievement rather than the handicapping condition.

Graduation Requirements and Handicapped Students

Many unresolved issues pertaining to the implementation of minimum competency testing programs remain to be addressed on state and local levels. Policy issues ripe for litigation surround the relationship between the test and the curriculum offered, the validity of the test and acceptable implementation timelines, the accommodations necessary for handicapped students to take the test, and the differences in the diplomas (certificates), if MCT is a requirement for graduation.

The resolution of these policy issues is significant because of the implications of public policy. As we have indicated, public policy determines the degree to which handicapped students will be treated unequitably by the controlling majority. Handicapped students are especially vulnerable to discriminatory practices in the area of minimum competency testing. These students must be assured of access to differing resources to achieve differing objectives. This "concept of equality" must be the basic principle upon which policy development occurs in the area of graduation requirements for handicapped students.

The appropriate education for a handicapped child should not be defined solely by the existing curriculum or methodology. Education must be seen as a continuous

process by which individuals learn to cope and function within their environment.

Since an assumption supporting the right to a free appropriate public education is that handicapped children will have an opportunity to complete their education, graduate, and receive a diploma signifying such an achievement, we will conclude this paper by briefly describing five policy approaches regarding graduation requirements and their anticipated positive and negative effects. In essence, the issue requires the creation of flexible policies that will reflect the individual differences of students to attain a particular level of educational achievement. These approaches are intended to be illustrative of emerging policies on state and local levels.

POLICY APPROACH #1 - THE PASS/FAIL APPROACH

A single, standard diploma will be issued to all students when they successfully complete a prescribed course of study. A school transcript will indicate each student's educational program and his/her accomplishments and, if a minimum competency test is applicable, will report the results.

Positive Aspects of Policy #1

- Use of a single, standard diploma and transcript is attractive because it is inclusive and comprehensive. All students would receive the same diploma if they successfully complete the prescribed course of study.
- The demands of prospective employers for information about specific skills and competencies are met by means of the transcript which accompanies the diploma.
- Confidentiality of student records can be maintained.

Negative Aspects of Policy #1

- Unless the transcript does accompany the diploma, prospective employers, training institutions, or institutions of higher learning may make unwarranted assumptions about a particular student's capabilities in specific areas. Such unwarranted assumptions may lead to failure on the part of the student, dissatisfaction and disappointment on the part of employers and others, or both.
- Critics of this approach argue that it discriminates against more severely handicapped students who by the very nature of their handicapping condition may not be able to ever complete a prescribed course of study and thus graduate.
- This approach could potentially give rise to challenge based on §504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

POLICY APPROACH #2 - THE CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDANCE APPROACH

A certificate of attendance will be issued to all students who participate in education programs for a required period of time but who fail to meet a specific graduation requirement, including a minimum competency test, if such a test is mandated.

Positive Aspects of Policy #2

- All students would be treated equally because they are subject to the same mode of differentiation. Handicapped students would not be singled out as a class to be denied a diploma automatically because of the nature of their special programs.

Negative Aspects of Policy #2

- Certificates of Attendance may be considered demeaning to both minority and handicapped students, who may not be able

to compete successfully with others because of disadvantaged circumstances. These students could "fail" graduation requirements that included a minimum competency test because they need (a) modification in testing procedures, (b) additional resources to compete successfully, or both.

- Upon receipt of such a document, a handicapped student under 21 years of age may be precluded from further education and related services. Policy makers will need to establish criteria to determine when a handicapped student has "completed" a prescribed course of study.

POLICY APPROACH #3 - THE IEP APPROACH

When a handicapped child requires substantial alternation in the curricular goals and objectives which will thus result in that child not completing the curriculum requirements or attaining the skills necessary to fulfill standard graduation requirements, then such curricular alternations will be set forth in the child's individualized education program (IEP). Eligibility to graduate and receive a standard diploma will be contingent upon the successful attainment of curricular goals and instructional objectives contained in that handicapped child's individualized education program. The IEP will also set forth criteria for measuring minimum competencies based upon the content of the handicapped child's IEP. A transcript, outlining the courses and/or competencies attained, will accompany the diploma.

Positive Aspects of Policy #3

- Reasonable accommodation of graduation requirements to meet the unique educational needs of handicapped students eliminates potentially discriminatory practices.

- Since attaining the goals and objectives of the IEP demonstrates successful completion of a particular requirement for a handicapped student, it will insure that the IEP is carefully reviewed when the student is not progressing at the anticipated rate.
- This approach sets forth criteria for measuring the minimum competencies of a handicapped child.
- Evaluation of the student occurs on a case by case basis.
- Potential employers can determine a graduate's course of study by requesting the student's transcript.

Negative Aspects of Policy #3

- To the same extent that the option is flexible with regard to student needs, it can become a source of confusion and friction over whether educational standards and the standard diploma are being "diluted."
- Critics of this approach could regard it as discriminatory against nonhandicapped students.

POLICY APPROACH #4 - THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DIPLOMA

All handicapped students will have access to specially designed instruction to meet their unique educational needs. A differentiated diploma will be issued to a handicapped student who successfully achieves the goals and objectives contained in his/her individualized education program, but does not fulfill other graduation requirements such as the passing of a minimum competency test or the completion of standard courses required for graduation.

Positive Aspects of Policy #4

- Educational programing is based upon a handicapped student's unique needs.

- Accommodation enables a handicapped student the opportunity to receive a diploma indicating successful attainment of the goals and objectives contained in the IEP.
- Such an approach enables school districts and potential employers to distinguish and identify those students who have successfully passed the minimum competency test.

Negative Aspects of Policy #4

- This approach can give the appearance of special treatment for handicapped students who fail the minimum competency test.
- A differentiated diploma may discriminate against a handicapped student and thus potentially give rise to challenge based on §504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

POLICY APPROACH #5 - THE CURRICULAR APPROACH

All students will have access to specialized curricula to meet their particular educational needs, abilities, and interests, i.e., college preparation, vocational education, basic skills, life management, etc. Each curriculum will have its own requirements for graduation, including a minimum competency test if appropriate. The diploma will attest that a student has achieved the essential standards of his/her prescribed curriculum.

Positive Aspects of Policy #5

- All students would have access to a program leading to a diploma. This policy has the advantage of securing the doctrine of equality of educational access.
- A minimum competency test or other standards could set levels of achievement for all students in each curriculum.
- A handicapped student could reasonably be expected to receive a diploma, indicating successful completion of their curriculum.

Negative Aspects of Policy #5

- Competencies for each curriculum track would have to be developed and validated.
- Handicapped students could be placed in a particular curriculum track rather than receive an education appropriate to their unique educational needs.
- Policy could have the effect of lowering the standards of certain curricula by focusing more on the access of certain classes of students to the program than on their performance once admitted to the program.

Conclusion

Equitable competency testing and its impact through public policy on all students, but especially on handicapped students, will continue to dominate the educational forefront during the years ahead. Because MCT focuses both on a student's individual needs and skills and on accountability for a school system, policy makers need to formulate flexible policies that result in equal access to differing resources to achieve different objectives. To attain this equitable result, policy makers must continually anticipate the positive and negative ramifications of the policies they formulate and their impact on both handicapped and nonhandicapped students. Public policy in the areas of competency testing and graduation requirements needs to be realistically and equitably applied.

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